WHAT’S TRUE ABOUT HUME’S ‘TRUE RELIGION’?

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ABSTRACT

Despite his well-known criticisms of popular religion, Hume refers in seemingly complimentary terms to ‘true religion’; in Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, his character Philo goes so far as to express ‘veneration for’ it. This paper addresses three questions. First, did Hume himself really approve of something that he called ‘true religion’? Second, what did he mean by calling it ‘true’? Third, what did he take it to be? By appeal to some of his key doctrines about causation and probability, and to some key features of the characters and content of the Dialogues, I argue, contrary to important recent interpretations by Immerwahr and Falkenstein, that Hume’s ‘true religion’ is a doctrine, enunciated by Philo, that he regarded as true in an epistemic sense.

Key Terms: Hume, religion, God, probability, causation, analogy, design, intelligence

Hume uses the term ‘true religion’ over twenty times in his writings. Most often, especially in his History of England, it refers simply to whatever the particular actors under discussion take to be the correct form of religion— as, for example, when Catholic plotters against the life of Elizabeth undertake, if necessary ‘to sacrifice their lives, in fulfilling a duty, so agreeable, as they imagined, to the will of God and to true religion’ (HE 4.41: 21) or when the Scottish General Assembly urges Mary ‘to renounce the blasphemous idolatry of the mass, with the tyranny of the Roman Antichrist; and to embrace the true religion of Christ Jesus’
(HE 4.39: 71). In the concluding Part 12 of Hume’s posthumously published *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, however, the character of Philo, widely if not universally taken to represent Hume himself, declares among his ‘unfeigned sentiments’ a ‘veneration for true religion’ (DNR 12.9: 219). Hume frequently criticized religion in print, and almost all of his knowledgeable contemporaries regarded him as irreligious. Did he really approve of something that he called ‘true religion’? If so, what did he mean by calling it ‘true’ – and what exactly is it? Those are the questions that I will try to answer.

### I. HUME’S APPROVAL OF TRUE RELIGION

His claim to express ‘unfeigned sentiments’ notwithstanding, it is worth considering the sincerity of Philo’s declaration of veneration for true religion. For one thing, the declaration occurs in a conciliatory section of *Dialogues* Part 12 in which he seems to many readers to ignore the unrefuted force of his own previous arguments concerning evidence of design in the universe – so much so, in fact, that the section has come to be commonly characterised as ‘Philo’s Reversal’. For another, he had already remarked in Part 1 of the *Dialogues* on an ‘excellent saying of Lord Bacon’ as follows:

> Having mentioned David’s fool, who said in his heart that there is no God, this great philosopher observes, that the Atheists nowadays have a double share of folly: for they are not contented to say in their hearts there is no God, but they also utter that impiety with their lips, and are thereby guilty of multiplied indiscretion and imprudence. Such people, though they were ever so much in earnest, cannot, methinks, be very formidable. (DNR 1.18: 139)

Although Philo here does not object to Bacon’s (and David’s) characterization of atheists as fools, he also seems to serve notice that, if he were an atheist, we should not expect him to say so outright.

Furthermore, and regardless of what we make of Philo’s intentions, it is worth considering whether Philo’s declaration represents Hume’s own unfeigned sentiments on this point. In a letter of 1764 to James Edmonstoune concerning the ecclesiastical career of a mutual acquaintance, he writes:

> It is putting too great a Respect on the Vulgar, and on their Superstitions, to pique one’s self on Sincerity with regard to them. Did ever one make it a point of Honour to speak truth to Children or Madmen? If the thing were worth being treated gravely, I shoud tell him, that the Pythian oracle, with the approbation of Xenophon, advised every one to worship the Gods {nomői poleős}. I wish it were still in my Power to be a Hypocrite in this particular. The common Duties
of Society usually require it; and the ecclesiastical Profession only adds a little more to an innocent Dissimulation, or rather Simulation, without which it is impossible to pass through the world. Am I a Lyar, because I order my Servant to say, I am not at home, when I do not desire to see company? (NLDH 41: 83)

Nevertheless, at the risk of earnestly setting out to explain why Hume really is not at home when in fact he merely does not desire to see company, it seems to me that he does indeed mean to endorse something that he calls ‘true religion’, for there is considerable internal evidence that Philo’s words represent Hume’s thoughts on this topic. In the passage from Part 12 already quoted, Philo contrasts his ‘veneration of true religion’ with his ‘abhorrence of vulgar superstition’ and remarks that the former has ‘no such pernicious consequences’ as the latter. But Hume’s \textit{History of England}, in addition to its various accounts of what others took to be ‘true religion’, contains a remark in Hume’s own voice that directly mirrors this latter claim of Philo’s:

In every religion, except the true, [the diligence of the clergy] is highly pernicious, and it has even a natural tendency to pervert the true, by infusing into it a strong mixture of superstition, folly, and delusion. (HE 3.29: 135)

A similar contrast begins his essay ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’:

That the corruption of the best things produces the worst, is grown into a maxim, and is commonly proved, among other instances, by the pernicious effects of superstition and enthusiasm, the corruptions of true religion. (EMPL 1.10.1: 73)

It is also significant that although Hume’s \textit{Natural History of Religion} does not contain the term ‘true religion’, it does begin with an endorsement of at least some portion of ‘genuine Religion’ in its assertion that ‘no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion’ (NHR Introduction 1). Furthermore, although Hume in his private letter to Edmonstoune excuses dissimulation to the vulgar about matters of religion on the grounds that it is often demanded by ‘the common duties of society’ whose performance allow one to ‘pass through the world’, he also declares that it is no longer in his own power to be ‘a hypocrite in this particular’; and in any case, the \textit{Dialogues} were intended for reading as much by a learned audience as by a vulgar one, and were in Hume’s later years, at least, intended for posthumous publication, too late to help or hinder him in ‘passing through the world’. If the \textit{Dialogues} offer something that Philo could plausibly venerate as ‘true religion’, then it is reasonable to conclude that Hume himself would approve it.
In the first paragraph of The Natural History of Religion, Hume defines ‘religion’ as ‘the belief of invisible intelligent power’ (NHR Introduction 1). Among the vulgar, he explains in that work, religion arises primarily from the passions of fear and hope – first in the form of ‘polytheism’, which is the belief in many such powers, and then, through natural psychological processes, in the form of ‘theism’ (we would say ‘monotheism’), which is the belief in one supreme such power. Philosophers – a much smaller group – are said, in contrast, to reason their way to a form of religion.

Truth as Aesthetic Origin and Proper Office. In the early parts of the Dialogues, Philo confidently offers what appear to be powerful objections to his friend Cleanthes’s argument that the universe and its natural parts have been designed by an intelligent power. For this reason, commentators have proposed that Hume regards true religion as ‘true’ only in some non-epistemic sense that is compatible with being false to the facts. Two different ‘non-epistemic’ senses have been proposed. It will be useful to consider each in some detail.

The first and best-known proposal is due to John Immerwahr, who writes:

My hypothesis is that the truth of true theism has to do with its source in human nature, not its justification in reason. Strictly speaking, true religion is no more justified than false religion. But only true religion is grounded in the passions in such a way that it can actually perform the ‘proper Office of religion’. Hume’s understanding of ‘true’ in this context is better captured by his alternative descriptions of this religious position as ‘genuine’ or ‘pure’.

(Immerwahr 1996: 327)

It is a central thesis of Hume’s philosophical psychology that belief consists in the ‘force and vivacity’ of ideas, a force and vivacity that they must acquire from ‘impressions’, which are naturally more forceful and vivacious. As Immerwahr explains his interpretive proposal, the ‘purer’ form of religion acquires its primary doxastic force and vivacity specifically from ‘calm passions’ of aesthetic sentiment that the mind feels when considering the beautiful order and adaptation of means to ends in nature; and this is meant to contrast with false or superstitious religion, which derives much of its force and vivacity from the violent passions of fear and hope. For Immerwahr’s Hume, moreover, it is only when religious belief is ‘grounded’ in this purer aesthetic way that is it able to perform ‘the proper Office of religion,’ which is ‘to reinforce and support morality’ – something that it then does in a way that Immerwahr describes as ‘strong’.1 These two elements of the interpretation will be examined in turn.

In support of the interpretive proposal that true religion’s belief-constituting force and vivacity is derived from aesthetic feeling, Immerwahr rightly notes
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(i) that Hume often characterises the natural human response to order, arrangement, and the adaptation of means to ends in aesthetic terms; and (ii) that Hume often characterises ‘the passions’ – which he divides into ‘calm’ and ‘violent’ – as capable of providing force and vivacity to ideas. Unfortunately, however, these two observations do not succeed in providing substantial support to the proposal. For unlike Immerwahr, Hume himself never characterises aesthetic responses – which he calls ‘sentiments of beauty’ – as ‘passions’, either calm or violent. Although, as sentiments, they are calm ‘impressions of reflection’ in his classificatory scheme, Hume consistently ascribes them to the faculty of ‘taste’ in deliberate contrast to that of ‘the passions’. Furthermore, despite his emphasis on the aesthetic pleasure that the mind can take in contemplating order, arrangement, and the adaptation of means to ends, Hume never gives any positive indication that the force and vivacity required for a belief in true religion results primarily or even in part from such pleasure.

Putting aside Immerwahr’s account of its doxastic source in aesthetic sentiment, however, what of his claim that true religion, as Hume understands it, is uniquely able to perform a ‘proper Office’ of reinforcing and supporting morality? While acknowledging that ‘Hume never wavers from his position that morality does not require any religious or theological commitment’, Immerwahr defends his claim about the ‘strong’ morality-supporting role of true religion by citing a preface that Hume drafted for the second volume of the History of England to be published (Volume 6). That preface states in part:

The proper Office of Religion is to reform Men’s Lives, to purify their Hearts, to inforce all moral Duties, & to secure Obedience to the Laws & civil Magistrate. While it pursues these useful Purposes, its Operations, tho’ infinitely valuable, are secret & silent; and seldom come under the Cognizance of History. (Mossner 1954: 306–7)

Hume intended this preface as a general defense against the criticism that his references to the effects of religion in the first volume had been universally negative. He decided in the end not to publish the preface, but he did include the key sentence from it just quoted (unaltered except for typography) in a footnote that appeared in the 1757 first edition of the volume (HE 6.71: 539n). He then removed the entire footnote for the 1770 and subsequent editions.

Whatever the reason for the final removal of the passage may have been, it is important to observe that it is to religion generally, and not to true religion specifically, that the ‘proper Office’ of supporting morality and obedience is being assigned in it. First, Hume gives no indication that true religion is in a unique position to fulfill this role. On the contrary, the most notable instance in which he assigns a positive social role to religion in a subsequent volume of the History
explicitly concerns superstitious religion rather than the true. There he writes concerning the reign of Henry III:

   It must be acknowledged, that the influence of the prelates and the clergy was often of great service to the public. Though the religion of that age can merit no better name than that of superstition, it served to [keep] . . . the community from falling to pieces, by the factions and independent power of the [warlike] nobles. (HE 2.12: 14)

Indeed, he may well have judged the devout Calvinism of his own beloved mother to be a more personal example of false religion having some valuable ‘secret and silent’ operation in addition to its more pernicious consequences. Second, Hume gives no indication that true religion is even in a strong position to fulfill the role of supporting morality. The abandoned preface does go on to repeat his point noted earlier that pernicious consequences result only from corrupted religion; hence, if there is any extent to which true religion prevents or is incompatible with corrupted religion, it might at least be hoped to prevent or avoid those negative consequences. But Hume goes no further.

Hume’s 1770 removal of the footnote from the History was not the end of the matter. In the posthumously published Dialogues, as Immerwahr also emphasises, Cleanthes makes a remark adapted from the abandoned preface and deleted footnote:

   The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and as its operation is silent, and only enforces the motives of morality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked, and confounded with these other motives. When it distinguishes itself, and acts as a separate principle over men, it has departed from its proper sphere, and has become only a cover to faction and ambition. (DNR 12.12: 220)

For Cleanthes, however, this is again not a remark specifically about true religion but rather a part of his argument that any religion even if corrupted is better than no religion at all, precisely because all religion as he understands it includes a belief in just rewards and punishments in a future state; it is this belief, Cleanthes holds, that has all of the enumerated positive consequences for morality. While Philo immediately replies that ‘all religion except the rational and philosophical kind’ will always become a cover to faction and ambition (DNR 12.13: 200), he quite obviously refrains both from agreeing that all religion involves such a belief about a future state and from endorsing Cleanthes’s claim that religion can have a net positive moral influence by means of it. On the contrary, he immediately goes on to dispute Cleanthes’s claim that belief in rewards
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and punishments in an afterlife regularly or significantly improves a person’s morals.

The furthest that Philo himself will go concerning the positive practical effects of specifically true religion is to suggest that, as religion ‘of the philosophical and rational kind’, it is a ‘species of philosophy’, beneficial in whatever ways philosophy in general is:

True religion, I allow, has no such pernicious consequences: but we must treat of religion, as it has commonly been found in the world; nor have I any thing to do with that speculative tenet of Theism, which, as it is a species of philosophy, must partake of the beneficial influence of that principle, and at the same time must lie under a like inconvenience, of being always confined to very few persons. (DNR 12.22: 223)

At least part of the ‘beneficial influence’ of philosophy generally, Philo implies, is that it leads its practitioners to ‘cultivate reason and reflection’, which can lessen the need for more vulgar motives (such as fear) to ‘keep under the restraints of morality’ (DNR 12.15: 222). He does not say why the cultivation of reason and reflection has this effect, but it may be by moderating the violent passions, by leading to the discovery that virtue is the best means to happiness in the present life, or both. By characterizing true religion as ‘philosophical and rational’, however, Philo suggests that it is true in an epistemic sense.

Truth as Justifying Worship. The second, and more recent, proposal is due to Lorne Falkenstein (2009), who holds that Philo’s favorable reference to ‘true religion’ is not primarily concerned with aesthetic origin or proper office, but is instead intended to draw a contrast between religions that conceive of invisible intelligent power as particularly concerned with human happiness, and those that involve more primitive, absurd, corrupt, demonic, or impassive conceptions of that power. ‘True philosophy’ might still prove that some of the latter forms of religion are false. But this is not to say that it manages to prove the more inflated conceptions of a benevolent provider to be true. So ‘true religion’, understood as belief in a particularly provident deity, may not turn out to be factually true. (193)

He offers this interpretation because he thinks of Hume’s term ‘true religion’ as meant to designate what Falkenstein calls ‘genuine theism . . . in a normative sense’, for which ‘genuineness’ requires belief in a deity that is not only single and supreme but also ‘morally worthy’ of worship, and hence benevolent and provident towards human beings.

Falkenstein finds this normative sense of ‘genuine theism’ a plausible one to attribute to Hume partly because he speculates that Hume intended to
include ‘worship’ as well as ‘belief of intelligible invisible power’ in his official conception of religion, and because The Natural History of Religion disparages lesser invisible intelligent powers – such as ‘fairies, goblins, elves, sprites’ (NHR 4.1) – as not meriting ‘any pious worship or veneration’. Falkenstein concedes, however, (i) that Hume at least sometimes uses a non-normative sense of ‘genuine theism’ that does not require a belief in divine benevolence or providence; and (ii) that in religious contexts Hume sometimes uses the term ‘false religion’ and the term ‘true’, in epistemic senses that are distinct from both the proposed normative and non-normative senses of ‘genuine theism’.

Falkenstein’s most specific textual support for attributing this normative sense of ‘genuine theism’ to Hume is Cleanthes’s remark in Part 12 of the Dialogues that

genuine theism ... represents us as the workmanship of a Being perfectly good, wise, and powerful; who created us for happiness, and who, having implanted in us immeasurable desires of good, will prolong our existence to all eternity, and will transfer us into an infinite variety of scenes, in order to satisfy those desires, and render our felicity complete and durable. (DNR 12.24: 224)

However, the Dialogues provide no reason why Philo or Hume should endorse Cleanthes’s account of the content of ‘genuine theism’, any more than Hume endorsed the Catholic plotters’ or the Scottish General Assembly’s accounts of the content of ‘true religion’. On the contrary, Part 11 of the Dialogues makes it quite clear that Philo, for his part, regards the belief in an invisible intelligent power who is ‘particularly concerned with human happiness’ as more rather than less ‘absurd’ than adopting what Falkenstein’s calls ‘impassive conceptions of that power’. Moreover, Philo soon goes on to quote Seneca (as it happens, not quite accurately) in support of a denial that it would ever be appropriate to worship any kind of God, at least in any way other than simply knowing such a being as it truly is: ‘To know God, says Seneca, is to worship him. All other worship is indeed absurd, superstitious, and even impious’ (DNR 12.32: 226).

To be sure, Philo does straightaway allow that Cleanthes’s version of ‘genuine theism’ paints out ‘engaging and alluring appearances’, and he remarks that ‘with regard to the true philosophers they are more than appearances’ (DNR 12.25: 224) – without specifying at the time exactly what more than alluring appearances they might be. Philo immediately goes on to observe, however, that vulgar superstitious religion cannot help but represent the afterlife in gloomy and fearful images; that fears concerning an afterlife are unreasonable (and hence presumably unphilosophical); and that if a divine being were to care about human behavior at all, that being would be more likely to look favorably upon philosophers (whether endeavoring to be theistic or skeptical) than upon the followers of superstitious religions (DNR 12.27–32: 226–6).
Falkenstein acknowledges that when Philo refers, in a key speech previously cited, to ‘that speculative tenet of Theism, which . . . is a species of philosophy’ (DNR 12.22: 223), Philo understands by this phrase a doctrine concerning the existence of an ‘intelligent creator’ who need not be concerned at all for human well-being, a doctrine that philosophy can therefore accept on the basis of reason; and Falkenstein evidently accepts this more limited doctrine is also the referent of Philo’s earlier phrase ‘religion of the philosophical and rational kind’. He simply maintains that Philo is distinguishing ‘that speculative tenet of Theism, which . . . is a species of philosophy’ from the ‘true religion’ with which his speech begins. Thus, vulgar religion, true religion (understood as Cleanthes’s alluring version of genuine theism), and philosophical theism (understood as a speculative tenet of philosophy uncommitted to divine benevolence – that is, religion of the philosophical and rational kind) instead become three different kinds of religion.

Yet this is unlikely to be Hume’s intended meaning, for he is insistent that ‘all religion but the true’ has pernicious consequences. If some or all philosophical theism does not qualify as true religion, therefore, this philosophical theism must have pernicious consequences by his lights. But this is far from anything that Hume or Philo would maintain; indeed, Philo emphasises only the benefits of this ‘speculative tenet of theism’ as a ‘species of philosophy’. Furthermore, Philo declares that all religion but that of the ‘philosophical and rational kind’ has at least the pernicious consequence of providing a ‘cover to faction and ambition’; hence, if there is true religion that is not philosophical theism, that true religion must have the pernicious consequence of providing a cover to faction and ambition – contradicting Philo’s earlier claim that true religion has no pernicious consequences. Finally, the order and context of Philo’s uses of ‘true religion’ confirm that they cannot be understood as contrasting with ‘religion of the philosophical and rational kind’ or as referring instead to Cleanthes’s ‘genuine theism’. For Philo’s reference to ‘religion of the philosophical and rational kind’ as the only religion that does not become a cover to faction and ambition almost immediately follows his introduction of ‘true religion’ to the discussion, and it is quite clearly a part of his praise of true religion as alone lacking pernicious consequences. Cleanthes’s introduction of ‘genuine theism’, in contrast, does not occur until after Philo’s last use of the term ‘true religion’ and serves to take the discussion in a new and different direction.

Accordingly, in Philo’s previously cited remark that

True religion, I allow, has no such pernicious consequences: but we must treat of religion, as it has commonly been found in the world; nor have I any thing to do with that speculative tenet of Theism, which, as it is a species of philosophy, must partake of the beneficial influence of that principle . . .

the word ‘nor’ is not meant to contrast philosophical theism with true religion. Rather, it introduces an intensified negative consequence of the initial claim

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that we must now treat of religion ‘as it has been commonly found in the world’ – namely, the consequence that he will not even have ‘any thing to do’ with true religion in the immediately following portion of the dialogue.² Philo says ‘that speculative tenet of Theism’ rather than ‘the speculative tenet of Theism’ because ‘that’ is a demonstrative adjective having ‘true religion’ as its antecedent. Far from praising Cleanthes’s version of ‘genuine theism,’ Philo emphasizes (i) that no religion ‘in the world’ actually limits its account of the Deity’s intentions with respect to humans simply to human happiness and virtue without bringing in other more disturbing elements, and (ii) that actual religions characterising the Deity as benevolent and provident are still morally pernicious by introducing doxastic requirements and species of ‘frivolous merit’ as requirements for salvation. He remarks that a conception of the state of departed souls as a truly desirable one is ‘a mere product of philosophy’ (DNR (12.28: 225); but this is because philosophers recognize it as a logical consequence of the hyperbolic praise of Deity to which superstitious theism naturally leads, not because such a conception is itself a part of religion of the philosophical and rational kind.

Thus, Philo’s true religion is not a ‘normatively genuine’ theism that demands an element of belief in a benevolent and provident being in order to justify worship; rather, it is a tenet that can be accepted on the basis of reason as a genuine part of the true and accurate philosophy. Indeed, as we have seen, Hume begins The Natural History of Religion by characterizing even ‘genuine’ theism and religion as having primary principles that ‘no rational enquirer can deny upon reflection’. In order to understand fully what Hume’s epistemically true religion might be, however, and exactly why he regards it as true, it is necessary to examine, first, some of Hume’s central doctrines about causation and probability and, second, some important aspects of the characters and content of his Dialogues.

3. CAUSATION AND PROBABILITY

Causation. In the Treatise and again in the first Enquiry, Hume famously offers two definitions of ‘cause’—one in terms of ‘constant conjunction’ and one in terms of mental association and inference. In the Treatise, he immediately draws four ‘corollaries’ from his definitions, the first of which is this:

We may learn, from the foregoing doctrine, that all causes are of the same kind, and that, in particular, there is no foundation for that distinction which we sometimes make betwixt efficient causes, and causes sine qua non; or betwixt efficient causes, and formal, and material, and exemplary, and final causes. For as our idea of efficiency is derived from the constant conjunction of two objects, wherever this is observed, the cause is efficient; and where it is not, there can never be a cause of any kind. (THN 1.3.14.32: 171)
Although he denies that ‘final causes’ are properly a kind of non-efficient cause apart from constant conjunction, Hume does not deny that there are ‘final causes in nature’, meaning by this that there are noteworthy instances of the ‘adaptation of means to ends’, especially ‘ends’ of self-preservation or pattern maintenance that involve the integrated and mutually supporting operations of parts. On the contrary, he regards such adaptations as common and even pervasive, especially in living things. In the Treatise, he notes the crucial role of many such adaptations in facilitating attributions of identity over time to plants and animals despite their obvious alterations (THN 1.4.6.12: 257), and he suggests that the human psychological mechanism producing belief in bodies itself constitutes an instance of natural adaptation of means to ends (THN 1.4.2.1: 187). In the first Enquiry, he also suggests that ‘those, who delight in the discovery and contemplation of final causes have’, in the psychological operation of inductive reasoning, ‘ample subject to employ their wonder and admiration’ (EHU 4.21–2).

Philo, too, readily grants the existence of ‘final causes’ in this sense throughout the Dialogues, and he devotes some time at the beginning of Part 12 to detailing some striking examples from Galen concerning the structure of the human body, even remarking that we have strong inductive reason to suppose that every physiological structure has some function or ‘intention of nature’ in the healthy operation of the body. Importantly, however, the mere recognition of such final causes no more entails for either Hume or Philo that the adaptation in question is the product of intelligent design than it would have for Aristotle, who readily recognised unthinking teleology. The primary point at issue in the Dialogues is not the fact of the prevalence in nature of final causes – nor of the more general ‘symmetry’, ‘arrangement’, or ‘order’ – but rather the explanation of that prevalence. For Hume, of course, this explanation must ultimately be in terms of efficient causes, because he regards all genuine explanation of matters of fact as ultimately causal, and all genuine causation as efficient.

Hume also accepts, as well confirmed by experience, what others have called the ‘Causal Maxim’: that is, the principle that there must be a cause for every beginning of existence, whether of an object or a quality in an object. Although he argues in the Treatise that the necessity of this maxim is neither intuitive nor demonstrative, he emphasises in a letter to John Stewart that he ‘never asserted so absurd a Proposition as that any thing might arise without a Cause’ (LDH 1.91: 186; see also his published A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh [1967]); the truth of the maxim, he thinks, is granted by all philosophers. Philo agrees in Part 2 of the Dialogues that ‘Nothing exists without a cause’ (DNR 2.3: 142).

This allegiance to the Causal Maxim does not conflict with the readiness of both Hume and Philo to invoke a possible ‘first cause’ of the world or universe. Neither assumes that our world or universe must constitute all that has ever existed; rather, they treat ‘the universe’ as an arrangement of things that may
be temporally limited, and therefore capable of being produced by other things already in existence, whether intelligent or not. Hume’s view of time also allows that a thing may always have existed and yet have produced only a finite series of causes without violating the Causal Maxim. At the same time, Hume and Philo are open to there being an infinite succession of causes and effects – events or even things – without any first member. It is important to emphasise, however, that such an infinite succession need not preclude there being a causal explanation for the prevalence of final causes even if such prevalence were itself an eternal feature of the succession. For Hume recognises two different kinds of explanation by efficient causation (THN Introduction 8: xvii; EHU 4.12). While some features of a universe will be explained by precedent causes that have brought them about, others may be explained by more general laws of nature that have those features as instances or particular applications – just as the laws governing projectiles may be explained through more general laws of motion. Thus, either an order-bestowing ‘first cause or causes’ of the universe in time or a ‘principle or principles of order’ embodied in the causal laws themselves could properly be invoked to explain the striking prevalence of final causes in the world.

**Probability.** In order to appreciate fully the character and status of Hume’s true religion, it is helpful to understand not only these doctrines about causation but also his conception of probability. He distinguishes two senses of the term ‘probability’: (i) a broad Lockean sense that involves all degrees of belief derived from experience and is opposed only to ‘demonstration’, and (ii) a narrower sense that involves only lesser degrees of belief derived from experience. In this second and narrower sense, probability is contrasted not only with demonstration but also with the highest degree of belief derived from experience, a degree of belief that he calls ‘proof’. Belief comes in degrees for Hume because the force and vivacity that constitutes it comes in degrees. In his view, one in effect feels a possible matter of fact to be probable to a certain degree (either to the highest degree, ‘proof’, or to a lower degree of ‘mere’ probability) by having an idea of it with a particular degree of force and vivacity, much as one in effect sees an object as being a particular shade of red by having a sense impression of it that is red in that particular shade. He treats this as directly analogous to the way in which one feels an object or performance to be beautiful by having a ‘sentiment of beauty’ from it, a remark to be witty by being amused by it, or a character to be virtuous by having a ‘sentiment of moral approbation’ in considering it. This is why he observes in the *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

Thus, all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. It is not solely in poetry and music we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. When I am convinced of any principle, it is only an idea which strikes more strongly upon me. When I give the preference to one set of
arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence. (THN 1.3.8.12: 103)

From the activation of the primitive capacities for feeling that constitute the five external senses, the sense of beauty, the sense of humor, and the moral sense, there soon arise, on Hume’s account, sense-based abstract ideas—what contemporary philosophers would be likely to characterize as ‘response-dependent concepts’. Ideas of things that resemble each other in producing the mental response characteristic of such a sense naturally become associated with each other and with a shared linguistic ‘general term’, with the result that one idea, serving as a kind of exemplar, is reliably elicited by the general term while the mind is also disposed to call up or ‘revive’ ideas of resembling objects and to use any of these ideas ‘in discourse and reasoning’ (THN 1.1.7). In the case of each of these senses, natural divergences in response—both for one person at different times and between different persons even at the same time—are felt to be disturbing and so lead naturally to convergence on a convenient ‘standard of judgment’ by which we ‘correct our sentiments’ (THN 3.3.1 ['Of the original of the natural virtues and vices'] and EMPL 1.23 ['Of the Standard of Taste']). In each case, this standard consists in an idealised perspective and an idealised set of sensitive endowments, the results of which are allowed to be authoritative, in principle, for determining what does and what does not properly fall under the abstract idea in question. Where abstract ideas are derived from a basic sense whose felt responses come in degrees, there will also be more specialised abstract ideas of particular degrees of a quality—such as degrees of redness, beauty, humor, or virtue—judged in relation to that standard. To locate an idea of a thing within the range of an abstract idea that correctly applies to it is to make a true predicative judgement, rather than a false one, about that thing.

The standard of judgement for a sense-based abstract idea is often accompanied by a set of experientially based ‘rules for judging’ by which users of the abstract idea seek to anticipate what the results of the application of the standard would be; such, for example, are the ‘rules of art’ in aesthetics. Nonetheless, where the tendency to a particular sensitive response to a particular kind of stimulus is so firmly embedded in human nature as to remain invincibly present even from the idealized perspective and with the idealized sensitive endowments of the developed standard of judgement, the rules must ultimately accommodate that response, and not vice versa. It is unlikely, of course, that any standard of judgement on which human beings will actually converge can ever be rendered perfectly precise, given the very large number of features of a perspective or of a set of sensitive endowments that might ever make a difference to what was felt by their means. Accordingly, there will remain in principle a certain range of what Hume calls (speaking of the case of aesthetics) ‘blameless diversity’ (EMPL 1.23.28: 243–4) in the application of a sense-based abstract
idea, a range for which the true or correct application is undetermined and so
remains a matter of individual sensibility or temperament. How broad that range
of blameless variation is depends on empirical features of the world and of the
senses with which we approach it. The range of blameless diversity for color
judgements proves, we may assume, to be rather small; but it becomes somewhat
broader for moral judgements, Hume thinks (EPM ‘A Dialogue’), and broader
still for aesthetic judgements (EMPL 1.23 ‘Of the Standard of Taste’) and for
judgements of wit and humor.

Crucially for our purposes, the schematic account of Humean sense-based
abstract ideas just outlined applies equally to Hume’s concept of probability, in
the broad sense of the term ‘probability’ that encompasses the narrower.³ This
concept is derived from what might be called, by a natural extension, the ‘sense
of probability’, a sense consisting in the capacity to feel degrees of force and
vividness in conceiving possible matters of fact. The ‘true standard of judgement’
for probability, he declares, consists simply in ‘experience’ (THN 1.3.9.12: 113)
as perceived by ‘the wise man [who] proportions his belief to the evidence’
(EHU 10.4). Below the level of proof, such proportioning can involve three
different species of probability in the narrower sense: the probability of chances’,
the probability of causes’, and ‘analogy’ (THN 1.3.11–12 and EHU 6). These
species of probability are distinguished by the psychological mechanisms that
produce them, and each has its own particular rules for judging, rules that in
some cases require balancing and ‘subtracting’ ‘experiments’ in ways that are
quite specific and quantifiable with respect to questions of degree. Whereas the
first two of these species of narrow probability result from some imperfection
or incompleteness in the experienced ‘constancy’ of the conjunction between
two kinds of things, however, analogy involves an imperfection or lack of
completeness in the ‘resemblance’ between objects previously experienced to
be involved in a constant conjunction and the additional object from which an
inference is now to be made. Accordingly, the ‘degrees’ of analogy lie primarily in
the degrees of that resemblance. Because resemblance is typically less susceptible
to quantified measurement than is the constancy of a conjunction, however, and
also because there are typically multiple dimensions of possible resemblance,
the probability derived from analogy is typically less subject to precise and
quantifiable rules, and the range for blameless diversity is often greater.

4. CHARACTERS AND CONTENT OF THE DIALOGUES

Characters of the Dialogues. Structurally, the Dialogues Concerning Natural
Religion consist of young Pamphilus’s report to his absent friend Hermippus of
conversations among Demea, Cleanthes, and Philo. Although Philo and Cleanthes
share, against Demea, a commitment to the experimental method, the two are
of contrasting temperaments. Unlike Cleanthes, Philo is by nature of a skeptical disposition; as Cleanthes observes, the ‘raising doubts and objections … seems, in a manner, natural and unavoidable to’ him to such an extent that the task of doing so suits him best ‘of all men living’ (DNR 7.17: 181). When remarking his ‘abhorrence of vulgar superstition’ in contrast to his ‘veneration for true religion’, Philo adds, ‘and I indulge a peculiar pleasure, I confess in pushing such principles, sometimes into absurdity, sometimes into impiety’ (DNR 12.9: 219). Cleanthes replies that his own ‘inclination’ about the value of popular religion ‘lies a contrary [and more positive] way’.

Nevertheless, Philo reports that he lives with Cleanthes as a friend ‘in unreserved intimacy’ (DNR 12.2: 214), and when he observes Cleanthes to be annoyed by the ‘vehemence’ with which he is pressing an argument, he is ‘immediately stopped short’ (DNR 2.25: 150). Once Demea has departed in something of a huff at the end of Part 11, but before pressing the case against the pernicious consequences of popular religion and describing his final conclusions, Philo devotes himself to finding common ground with Cleanthes on theological formulations, replacing his earlier phrase ‘intention of nature’ by the simpler ‘intention’ or ‘purpose’ to describe final causes in nature; it is largely for this reason that readers have judged the beginning of Part 12 to involve a ‘Reversal’ on Philo’s part.4

For his part, Cleanthes reciprocates Philo’s friendship, professing to find value in their reasoning together about such ‘sublime and interesting subjects’ (DNR 12.1: 214). While Cleanthes and Pamphilus both refer to Philo’s ‘spirit of opposition’ (DNR 10.29: 219 and DNR 11.21: 213), only Cleanthes declares it to be ‘noble’. Not surprisingly, all four of the characters present for the discussions express some views with which Hume is known to agree; Philo stands alone, however, in stating no opinions (or at any rate not clearly stating any opinions) that Hume is positively known to reject. Like Hume too, however, Philo is more than willing to offer formulations that he accepts in their strict or literal meaning but which are calculated to imply to the incautious reader or interlocutor much more in the way of concessions to orthodoxy than is really being offered.

Content of the Dialogues. Five features of the Dialogues are particularly important for present purposes. First, the point at issue is formally and explicitly limited to the nature, and not the existence, of the Deity. Pamphilus remarks in his introductory letter that the being of a God is obvious, while the nature of the divine being is obscure; and Philo himself asserts firmly near the outset that ‘where reasonable men treat these subjects, the question can never be concerning the being but only the nature of the Deity’ (DNR 2.3: 142). Yet because Demea regards himself as believing in God – indeed, as an orthodox believer – while denying any positive understanding of the divine nature, the jointly shared content of the claim that a Deity exists is merely that there is a ‘universal cause’ – that is,
a cause (perhaps even a complex conjunctive cause) of the order (including final causes) present in the universe.

Second, the central point of dispute between Cleanthes and Philo concerns the status of a single argument, appealing specifically to the probability of analogy, that Cleanthes finds particularly persuasive in establishing not only the already-agreed-upon existence of a Deity but also its nature:

The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since, therefore, the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence. (DNR 2.5: 143)

In the early parts of the *Dialogues*, Philo vigorously resists Cleanthes’s claim that ‘all the rules of analogy’ require this conclusion. He does so in several ways. First, he offers positive disanalogies between machines, on the one hand, and the universe as a whole and its other parts, on the other. Second, he criticises extending an explanation of such a small part of the universe to an explanation of the whole. Third, he proposes alternative explanations of final causes that deserve to be considered, in accordance with such rules, worthy or even superior competitors to intelligent design. In addition, he remarks on the numerous ‘inconveniences’ of taking the analogy to be as strong as Cleanthes supposes; these consist chiefly in impious or otherwise religiously suspect pieces of anthropomorphism. Cleanthes, for his part, responds by proposing analogies between other admittedly strong arguments from analogy and his own argument from analogy to an intelligently designing Deity with a mind much like the human.

Third, however, Cleanthes also proposes – based on yet another meta-analogy, this time between probability and aesthetics – that his own analogy between the final causes prevalent in the universe and the products of intelligent human design should be regarded as rendering his conclusion about the divine nature highly probable because of the analogy’s immediate force on observers. Crucially, he argues that this is so even if the argument cannot be seen to conform to regular rules of probability and (specifically) of analogy:

Some beauties in writing we may meet with, which seem contrary to rules, and which gain the affections, and animate the imagination, in opposition to all the precepts of criticism, and to the authority of the established masters of art. And if the argument for Theism be, as you pretend, contradictory to the
What’s True about Hume’s ‘True Religion’?

principles of logic; its universal, its irresistible influence proves clearly, that there may be arguments of a like irregular nature. Whatever cavils may be urged, an orderly world, as well as a coherent, articulate speech, will still be received as an incontestable proof of design and intention. (DNR 3.8: 155)

Philo concedes that this point has some force – as must Hume himself, given the priority already noted of invincible sentiment over rules for judging in applying sense-based concepts generally. Thus, Philo replies (two sections and many pages before his alleged ‘Reversal’):

Formerly, when we argued concerning the natural attributes of intelligence and design, I needed all my sceptical and metaphysical subtilty to elude your grasp. In many views of the universe and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms; nor can we then imagine how it was ever possible for us to repose any weight on them. (DNR 10.37: 201)

Fourth, Philo goes on to argue in Part 11, from the prevalence of both ‘natural’ and ‘moral’ evil, for a conclusion with which he finds himself ‘more at ease’, and against which it is not he but Cleanthes who must ‘tug the laboring oar’: namely, that ‘there is no view of human life, or of the condition of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes’ of a Deity (DNR 10.37: 201), including ‘benevolence’ (concern for the happiness of human beings) and ‘rectitude’ (concern for virtue).

Finally, and also of crucial importance, Philo describes in Part 12 two different ‘verbal disputes’ affecting the formulation of religious doctrines, each resulting from the absence of a ‘standard’ for the application of concepts of degree. The first is a merely verbal dispute between ‘theists’ and ‘atheists’, resulting from the absence of any very precise standard for degrees of resemblance that is applicable to cases of analogy such as that between order in nature and order in products of human design. The second is a dispute between ‘dogmatists’ and ‘sceptics’, ascribed chiefly to temperament, that is ‘entirely verbal, or at least regards only the degrees of doubt and assurance, which we ought to indulge with regard to all reasoning’, resulting from the absence of any very precise standard for degrees of probability in the face of ‘difficulties’ concerning human cognitive faculties (DNR 12.8n: 219).

Before describing these disputes, and as part of his conciliatory efforts towards Cleanthes, Philo professes that ‘no one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound devotion to the divine Being as he discovers himself to reason, in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature’ (DNR 12.2: 214), and he then happily reviews the uncontroverted ubiquity of final causes. The looming question, however, is of course this: how far can the nature
of the divine Being—a Being whose mere existence is uncontroverted insofar as
it is simply the causal source or sources of those final causes—reveal itself ‘to
reason’ in a contrivance and artifice of nature that is ‘inexplicable’? ‘No human
understanding can compute’ the number of final causes, Philo affirms, but he
also adds revealingly that ‘no understanding [can] estimate their cogency’ in
establishing an intelligent divine artificer.

It is at this point that Philo employs his account of the first verbal dispute
to insist that upon reflection everyone—professed theists and professed atheists
alike—must grant both that the ‘works of nature bear a great analogy to the
productions of art’ (DNR 12.6: 216) and that there must be ‘vast differences’
between the Deity and what we understand by ‘mind’ or ‘intelligence’ from
experience with our own fleeting ideas and impressions. If we wish to ‘vary
the expression’ from ‘God’ or ‘Deity’, we ‘may’ call that being ‘Mind’ or
‘Thought’ on the basis of ‘some considerable resemblance’, Philo allows; but the
crucial question of the degree of resemblance—whether ‘some’ or ‘great’ or ‘very
great’—simply ‘admits of [no] exact mensuration which may be the standard in
the controversy’. Furthermore, all observed sources of adjustment of means to
ends whatsoever—from the ‘rotting of a turnip’ to the ‘generation of an animal’
to the ‘structure of human thought’—bear some analogy to each other and hence
also to the Deity. In light of the verbal character of this dispute, he urges the
‘antagonists’ that ‘if you cannot lay aside your disputes, endeavor, at least to cure
yourselves of your animosity’ (DNR 12.6–7: 216–19). Philo applies his general
account of the second verbal dispute to help explain the more specific difference
between (i) ‘philosophical theists’, a ‘very few . . . who entertain, or rather indeed
endavor to entertain, suitable notions of [God’s] divine perfections’; and (ii)
‘philosophical sceptics’,

... a sect almost equally rare, who, from a natural diffidence of their own capacity,
suspend, or endeavor to suspend all judgment with regard to such sublime and
extraordinary subjects. (DNR 12.32: 226–7)

5. THE CONTENT OF TRUE RELIGION

The final paragraph of Philo’s closing speech begins:

If the whole of Natural Theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves
itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined
proposition, That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear
some remote analogy to human intelligence: if this proposition be not capable
of extension, variation, or more particular explication: if it affords no inference
that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: and
if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further than to the human
intelligence, and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind; if this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs, and believe that the arguments on which it is established exceed the objections which lie against it? (DNR 12.33: 227)

Although ascribed only to ‘some people’, the proposition ‘That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence’ sounds very much like a conclusion for which Philo himself has been arguing; and the limitation of ‘the Whole of Natural Theology’ to it, especially to the exclusion of ‘other qualities of the mind’, such as benevolence and rectitude, sounds very like something that he has been defending as well.

There are in fact at least two quite different respects or dimensions in which Philo’s proposition is ‘somewhat ambiguous or at least undefined’, corresponding to the two different verbal disputes he identifies: the degree of the resemblance or analogy, and its degree of probability. In each dimension, moreover, there are several distinct considerations bearing on the ‘ambiguity’ to keep in mind. In calling the analogy ‘remote’, Philo evidently means to indicate that, given both (i) the many resemblances and many differences between order resulting from human design and order in the rest of nature, and (ii) the absence of a standard of degrees of resemblance applicable to this case, the resemblance can (‘probably’) be said to lie in a vaguely defined range that all parties should agree deserves to be called at least ‘remote’. As Philo earlier emphasizes, this also leaves so far unspecified just what respects of resemblance to human intelligence are more probable than others: for example, is it to be supposed that the Deity feels sense perceptions, thinks with fleeting ideas, or is motivated by desires, all operating in accordance with psychological laws similar to those governing human minds?

In characterizing the remote analogy as ‘probable’, Philo evidently means to indicate that it does not constitute a ‘proof’ of even a remote resemblance between the Deity and human intelligence. In not specifying the degree of probability, he is evidently reflecting the fact that the standard of judgement for probability – that is, the idealized perspective of experience as perceived by the wise man – does not yield a precise degree of probability in cases where there are one or (even more so) multiple aspects of resemblance and difference that do not allow of a standard of measurement.

In not further specifying even a broad range of probability, however, Philo is also leaving open the extent to which two other factors bearing on probability should properly be weighed, and how those weights should be expressed. The first is the overall diminution of ‘belief and assurance’ that is produced by recognition of the general difficulties affecting human cognitive faculties. For Philo, the precise amount of this diminution, and even more its verbal expression, differ
as a matter of temperament between dogmatists and sceptics, in a way that is clearly not fully resolved by the standard of judgement for probability. The second is the increase of ‘belief and assurance’ in a single intelligent Deity that results from the ‘irregular’ additional doxastic force of this particular analogy – a force so vigorously pressed by Cleanthes and allowed as legitimate to at least some extent by Philo. The precise amount of this force, too, Philo implies, varies not only from one time to another for a single individual, but also varies between individuals as a matter of temperament between ‘philosophical theists’ and ‘philosophical sceptics’, in a way that is again not fully resolved by the standard of judgement for probability. The less the accommodation that is properly made for irregular force, of course, the greater the amount of resemblance there must be between the observed effects in order to sustain any proposed degree of probability for any proposed amount or character of resemblance between the human minds and the Deity.

Because these two quite different dimensions of indeterminacy – degree of resemblance and degree of probability – magnify each other in this case, there results a very large range of blameless diversity concerning judgements of, and even more concerning expressions of, the probability to be ascribed to the existence of a supreme intelligent designer. Diverse judgements and expressions within this range may result from mere blameless differences in philosophical temperament – such as the notable differences between Cleanthes and Philo. These differences need not and should not breed animosity or hinder friendship, in Hume’s view.

In leaving open this large range of blameless diversity, Philo’s proposition itself makes a very modest positive claim: that there is at least ‘some’ probability of at least a ‘remote’ resemblance between the cause or causes of order in the universe and human intelligence. The probability in question is presumably great enough to render at least a remote resemblance more probable than not – but the proposition does not specify how much probability there is to any greater amount of resemblance.

Because Philo’s proposition affirms only a minimum degree of probability for a remote analogy, Philo, Hume, and Cleanthes, too, can agree that it is a correct predicative judgement of probability; this is so even though Cleanthes would not limit himself to it. As a correct judgement, it may properly be epistemically ‘venerated’ – that is, normatively honored and respected – as true. Furthermore, as an expression of at least some degree of ‘belief of invisible intelligent power’, assent to this minimal true proposition qualifies as ‘religion’ in Hume’s carefully defined sense; hence, as Philo proposes, a ‘religious’ man can give it a ‘plain . . . assent’. At the same time, as a theoretical proposition concerning the probability of distant matters of fact to which a ‘philosophical assent’ may be given as a result of probable reasoning, it is also a ‘speculative Tenet of philosophy’. Although the belief is not a direct or substantial support to morality – ‘affording’ in Philo’s
words ‘no inference that can be the source of any action or forbearance’ and
beneficial only in the way that all philosophy in general is beneficial – restricting
oneself to it at least prevents the pernicious consequences of superstitious religion.
And although it does not postulate a Deity morally worthy of worship, it is
‘genuinely’ religion for all that – indeed, it is the shared minimal content of all
religion of the only ‘philosophical and rational’ kind. It is, I submit, Hume’s own
true religion.5

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1 A somewhat similar interpretation has been proposed more recently by Willem Lemmens (2011), who regards Hume’s ‘true religion’ as a kind of ‘philosophical contemplation’ of order. This contemplation is said to involve a ‘principle of design or a highest intelligent cause’ but is at bottom a matter of aesthetic feeling rather than the product of reason. On Lemmens’s account, as on Immerwahr’s, the ‘proper office’ of true religion is to support morality. Compare also Livingston (1985). According to Livingston, true religion is a ‘passion of piety’ that has the support of morality as its ‘proper office’ and ‘has no claim to be ultimately true’ – although it is said the share this last feature with ‘the philosopher’s thought’ more generally (pp. 64–5).

2 Thus, to read Philo’s remark properly, one places the emphasis on ‘nor . . . any thing to do with’ rather than on ‘nor . . . that speculative tenet of Theism.’

3 For a much fuller account of Hume’s theory of sense-based concepts and its application to the case of probability, see Garrett (forthcoming).

4 For a discussion of the importance of the friendship between Philo and Cleanthes, although one reaching a different conclusion about Philo’s meaning, see Dees (2002).

5 I wish especially to thank for helpful questions and comments: Charlotte Brown, John Corvino, Jonathan Cottrell, Stephen Darwall, Georges Dicker, Michael Gill, James Hill, Emily Kelahan, David Landy, Willem Lemmens, Lawrence B. Lombard, Tito Magri, William E. Morris, David Owen, Örson K. Öyman, Peter Millican, Lewis Powell, Bruce Russell, Paul Russell, M.A. Stewart, and John P. Wright. I also wish to thank audiences at the Philosophy in Assos Tenth Conference; the Institute of Philosophy and Religious Studies of the Philosophy Faculty of Charles University, and the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences; the New York City Workshop in Early Modern; and the Wayne State University Department of Philosophy.